

Doug Friesen

Duxbury Design

Give a brief description of your business.

Residential designer, designing renovations and custom homes on the South Shore.

How long have you been in business?

I started my company in 1984, first starting as a construction and contracting company.

How did you get started?

As a builder, I soon found I was not happy with the architectural plans I was getting, and I wanted to have more creative control over what I built. I already had a good design sense – I'm not sure you can learn that – and I already had a background in technical drawing. In that day it was all hand drawing! I taught myself the methods of architectural notation, just by looking at how it was done. It's not rocket science; it's just like learning musical notation or something, and I already knew how to build.

The building code in Massachusetts sets aside the "one and two family" part of the code and specifically says anyone may be involved in it, both on the design and construction ends. Essentially, our entire almost 400-year heritage of houses was mostly designed and built by lay people, and that right is practically enshrined into the constitution. I hold an unrestricted construction supervisor's license, so I know construction from top to bottom, and much of the rest of it, the aesthetics, is a combination of intuition and studying our rich heritage of houses left to us by our ancestors.



PHOTO/DAVE MACCAFERRI

With his wife's garden shed, which he built, outside the window, pictures of his love for sailing behind him, and his design work at his fingertips, Doug Friesen is surrounded by his life's passions.

Of course the challenge today is to somehow fit modern lifestyles into the charm houses used to have and often don't today. I say in my Web site, "I like to think future generations might admire our work with the same fondness we feel for the architectural charm that has been endowed to us..."

Up to about 10 years ago, I was designing most of what my crews built, and other builders and homeowners were asking me for design services. One morning I woke up and realized that it was the designing I loved, and at that point I knew I was done with the construction side of it. Building is a tough business. Like my accountant kept saying, "There are too many moving parts!" I wanted to simplify my life and go for quality over quantity.

My timing was good, as the baby boomers and all the generations behind all had serious nesting instincts. That, and low interest rates, rightly or wrongly, caused every aspect of housing to soar, and I was part of it. I was as busy as I could be almost right away.

The renovation aspect of construction has always been huge in New England, and that has been 80 percent of my business. Let's face it, nine out of 10 new houses built are generic Colonials. Although there are more impressive custom homes now than in the past, renovations has always been where the creativity is. It's also more recession proof.

What should people know about you and your business?

I like to think I bring something rare to the table, that is, a deep and intense knowledge of construction combined with design skills. There is a traditional animosity between builders and architects. I'm not an architect, but I bridge the gap between the two very different worlds. I understand them both. The builder thinks the architect is an egghead, and the architect thinks the builder is a bonehead! Usually the homeowner suffers the fallout from that animosity. My attitude is that both sides have something to offer, and whichever side cuts off what they could learn from the other, they are just hurting themselves. And their clients, of course.

Builders like my plans because they are practical. I draw the plan I would want if I was building it. Homeowners also like knowing that there are not likely to be surprises from the contractor if the plans are done by a person who knows construction intimately. That, and my body of work, reflects my ability to re-interpret traditional styles in a modern way.

The other thing that sets me apart is that I use cutting edge 3D-modeling software that allows home owners to see the design evolving almost as if it was real. I'm not the only one using this technology, but there are remarkably few of us. Homeowners love it!

What is the best business advice you ever received?

I come from five generations of small business owners, and my grandfather and my father always said never compromise your standards and integrity. I have tried not to.

I have a framed picture of my grandfather on the wall facing my desk. He provides me guidance that I conduct myself in a manner of which he would approve!

Tell us a memorable story about your business.

Once I was going to start a renovation, and two houses right beside each other looked

very similar. I didn't look where I was going, and ended strolling up the back yard and onto the deck of a perfect stranger with a chainsaw in my hand. That freaked them out quite a bit!

Tell us about a mistake you made in business. What did you learn from it?

Most business problems come from not giving enough information to clients. They need enough information to make their own decisions as to what's right for them, and making assumptions about that can get you in trouble.

If you could wave a magic wand and make any change in your industry that you wanted, what would it be?

To dispense with these ridiculous new hurricane regulations that have us building houses as if they were on the tip of Cape Hatteras. The money that goes into that would have been much better spent on higher energy efficiency standards for houses.

What's the best thing about your job?

I get to realize people's hopes and dreams on a daily basis. Also, my 3D software is like getting paid to play video games!

So, how's business these days, anyway?

Right after the economic collapse, there was an immediate pullback from anything construction related by 50 or 60 percent. 2009 was definitely a low year. To survive you had to get lean. I found that the network of people I have worked with and for over the years was wide and deep, and it provided me the means to survive. This spring, things are coming back impressively. It might never go back to the way it was, but I am busier than I have been in a long time, and the near-term future looks good. Who dares look beyond that these days?

Duxborough Designs is located at 153 West St., Duxbury. Call Doug Friesen at 781-934-7265 or visit his website at www.duxboroughdesigns.com.